
Selected observations from The Gambia, 1997–1999, with comments on the identification of a number of species

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À l'occasion de séjours en Gambie pendant la saison sèche, entre novembre 1997 et novembre 1999, un certain nombre d'observations intéressantes ont été faites. Des données sur 33 espèces, dont certaines sont considérées comme rares dans le pays, sont présentées. Des notes sont incluses concernant l'identification de certaines d'entre elles qui sont assez mal connues ou traitées de façon insatisfaisante dans la littérature.

This paper aims to detail more interesting observations made during tours co-led by myself to The Gambia in 1997–1999, and to comment on species' identification that have been less adequately covered by field guides. Other tour guides included Steve Madge, in 1997 and 1998, Dick Forsman and Dave Cottridge, both in 1999, and several locals, including Seedy Saidu (November 1997), Solomon Jallow (November–December 1998 and February 1999), Tamba Jefang (November–December 1999) and Dembo Sonko (November–December 1998). These local guides have swiftly established a reputation as excellent field ornithologists. Where relevant, notes on the identification of rarer species are included. As most visitors to The Gambia will be armed with the largely excellent field guide by Barlow *et al*¹, I have aimed to discuss a number of errors (most notably among raptors) contained therein, which were brought to light in part through our observations.

Place names

For the purposes of standardisation, all names used here are taken from *The Gambia Traveller's Map*, published by Macmillan (1996). Acronyms are used for the country's main political divisions as follows: WD = Western Division, NBD = North Bank Division, LRD = Lower River Division, CRD = Central River Division and URD = Upper River Division. Note that the Macmillan map still refers to CRD under the old name of MacCarthy Island Division.

1999 weather conditions

Of tours to date, the most interesting was that in late November 1999. The summer wet season had been protracted and had a profound effect on birdlife in several ways. We recorded a number of species that are generally wet-season visitors, either for the first time or in greater numbers than usual (e.g. Beaudouin's Snake Eagle *Circaetus (gallicus) beaudouini* and

Rufous-chested Swallow *Hirundo semirufa*). A number of weaver and bishop/widowbird species were still in nuptial plumage, making identification easier and facilitating a greater understanding of their distributions. Finally, there was a notable dearth of Palearctic migrants, which had perhaps found favourable conditions further north and not (yet) arrived. Most notable was the absence of Palearctic warblers, raptors and Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*.

Selected species list

European Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*

Immature near Jurunku, NBD on 22 November 1997 and another at Tendaba, LRD, on 27 November 1998 were both with small parties of African Spoonbill *P. alba*. Four flew over Bund Road, Banjul, WD, on 6 February 1999.

Black Egret *Egretta ardesiaca*

Widespread. Barlow *et al*¹ repeat the error made by Hancock & Kushlan⁶, Brown *et al*² and del Hoyo *et al*³ by illustrating the species with a pale eye. It is dark and thus a useful identification pointer. The mistake presumably dates to when Slaty *E. vinaceigula* and Black Egrets were considered a single species. Slaty Egret has a pale eye.

Lesser Flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor*

Eleven, with seven Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber*, beside the main river opposite Kemoto, near Wandofalo Bolon, NBD, on 2 December 1998.

Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*

Single juveniles, all in 1999, at Marakissa, WD, on 22 November, Pirang, WD, on 23 November, west of Jangiangbureh, CRD, on 30 November and Jakhaly, CRD, on 1 December. Considered a rare migrant¹.

Bat Hawk *Macheiramphus alcinus*

At Tendaba, NBD, in 1999, a single at dusk on 26 November flew north across the river. Subsequently, three, perhaps a family party, hunted over mangroves by Kisi Bolon, NBD, on 1 December, with at least two present the following evening. Very few records for The Gambia and none of multiple individuals¹.

Black Kite *Milvus m. migrans/Milvus m. parasitus*

Widespread and usually common; some confusion exists over the distribution of the two taxa. While some individuals are sufficiently similar as to be inseparable given normal field views, most are reasonably easily distinguished, using head colour, underparts colour and markings, underwing colour and markings, and moult timing.

During our dry-season visits, *parasitus* (the resident form) is usually widespread, though only abundant near the coast, where it occupies the species' typical niche in tropical areas *viz.* as a scavenger around habitation. Inland, it appears generally scattered along the river, where small parties often frequent mangroves. The form *migrans* occurs as a dry-season visitor from the Palearctic. Though singles are occasionally encountered, it generally occurs in groups, wherever abundant food is available. Not noted near the coast, where apparently excluded by *parasitus*. Occurrence clearly depends on weather and food availability, with none recorded in 1999, but a flock of at least 4,000 in an area of several km, north of the river and east of Farafenni, CRD, on 29 November 1998, feeding on a huge grasshopper/locust swarm over dry grassland. This flock (which may have continued into Senegal) represents a significant percentage of the West European breeding population.

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*

Sub-adult (fourth-year) at Sanyang, WD, with Hooded Vultures *Necrosyrtes monachus*, on 9 February 1999. Sanyang appears to be a regular site for the species, though it remains a rarity elsewhere in The Gambia¹.

Beaudouin's Snake-eagle *Circaetus (gallicus) beaudouini*

In 1999 a displaying pair and juvenile at Pirang, WD, on 23 November, three adults between Jangjangbureh and Baboon Island, CRD, on 30 November and two (perhaps some of the same) at Jakhaly rice fields, CRD, on 1 December, with single adults at Faraba Banta, WD, on 26 November, Tendaba, LRD, on 27 November and Bakadagy, URD, on 29 November. Frequently misidentified in the past but, as noted by Clark³, is easily recognised in the field, at least in adult plumage. Incorrect criteria for its identification have been perpetuated in the literature^{1,2,5}. It appears to be a wet-season breeder in The Gambia, which generally moves south and/or east during the dry season. Many past observations may be questionable, as observers have used incorrect identification criteria, perhaps confusing knowledge of its geographical and seasonal range, caused in part by its treatment within Short-toed Eagle in much of the keynote literature².

Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*

Singles, in 1997, east of Farafenni, CRD, on 24 November, Basse on 25 November and near Jakhaly, CRD, on 26 November, and, in 1998, near Farafenni, CRD, on 29 November and near Jappen, LRD, on 1 December. Barlow *et al*¹ is confusing for a number of reasons, principally because of the incorrect illustrations of *Circaetus* species. The text states that *beaudouini* may occur, then lists sightings, and also indicates that *gallicus* is recorded in May–July. This appears unlikely, unless first-year, non-breeding *gallicus* remain on the wintering grounds, though

a peak in observations still appears strange in this period. It is probable that such observations involve immature *beaudouini*, which are more like *gallicus* in appearance².

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*

Occasional in small numbers. A melanistic male and a female, over saltmarsh at Kisi Bolon, NBD, on 28 November 1998. Melanistic individuals are rare and two together is remarkable. They were sexed on the amount and distribution of white on the underwings.

Red-necked Buzzard *Buteo auguralis*

One at close quarters between Bansang and Jangjangbureh, CRD, on 25 November 1997, and two among a huge flock of Black Kite north of the river in CRD, on 29 November 1998. Typical *Buteo* in structure, but all had much less rufous than indicated in Barlow *et al*¹ with, except for the obvious rusty tail, rufous confined to the head- and neck-sides.

Wahlberg's Eagle *Aquila wahlbergi*

Widespread and quite common. Barlow *et al*¹ oversimplify its identification, making little reference to the appearance of immatures sub-adults. The former, in particular, can be confusing as they tend to fan the tail more than adults (causing the unwary to often identify such individuals as Tawny Eagle *A. rapax*). During the protracted moult from juvenile to adult plumage, *wahlbergi* may attain a generally buff pale brown plumage with a dark brown head. This plumage also occurs in Tawny Eagle, but is poorly described in the literature.

Ayres's Hawk Eagle *Hieraaetus ayresii*

Adult over Abuko, WD, on 17 November 1997. A relatively small, compact eagle, shorter winged and stockier than superficially similar African Hawk Eagle *H. spilogaster* with clear barring on flight feathers. Immature at Pirang, WD, on 23 November 1999, was very instructive as Barlow *et al*¹ only cover adult and juvenile plumages. Structurally like Booted Eagle *H. pennatus*, with similar 'landing lights' on leading edge of wing, but all flight and tail feathers clearly barred, no white rump patch and no pale bar on upperwing-coverts. Differences from juvenile plumage included underwing-coverts creamy white (not buff), body creamy (not buff) and clearly had a few heavy, dark flank blotches, indicating adult plumage. This appears to be the first observation of a non-adult in The Gambia. The species' status remains unclear in the country, though it is obviously scarce. Sub-adults could easily be overlooked, especially if distant, when they may be misidentified as Booted Eagles.

Red-necked Falcon *Falco chicquera*

Frequent, usually in pairs and occasionally hunting cooperatively. Confusion exists due to its coverage in Barlow *et al*¹. All adults seen by MDC in The Gambia have the chestnut confined to the central crown and back of head. The crown-sides and neck are dark blackish brown, creating a head pattern not dissimilar to a diminutive Lanner *F. biarmicus*. Barlow *et al*¹ appear to illustrate the nominate Indian race, which has more extensive chestnut giving a hooded appearance.

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*

Singles at Denton Bridge, near Banjul, WD, on 19 November 1997, 21 November and 24 November 1998, and 25 November 1999, probably all involve the same wintering individual. Further singles at Kemoto, LRD, on 22 November 1997 and opposite Tendaba, NBD, on 2 December 1999. All were the large, highly migratory race, *calidus*. Barlow *et al*¹ appear confused as to which races occur in The Gambia. *F. p. calidus* is referred to as the Mediterranean race, though this is presumably a misprint. The forms *brookei* and *peregrinus* are cited as potentially occurring, but both are largely sedentary and most likely to be only vagrants.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus (argentatus) cachinnans*

Single adult *L. c. michabellii* at Bald Cape, Tanji, WD, on 24 November 1999. Identified by structure, bare-part coloration and mantle tone. This highly dispersive form is perhaps more likely to occur in The Gambia than the largely sedentary *L. c. atlantis*.

Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii*

At least four in a large mixed flock of gulls and terns at Bald Point, Tanji, WD, on 24 November 1999. All were in first-winter plumage and initially noticed due to their obviously long, fine bills. The plumage is little described and such individuals could be easily overlooked. All had an obvious dark bar on the lesser coverts (like other small *Sterna* terns) with dark, retained juvenile primaries, all reducing the obvious pale appearance typical of adults.

African Cuckoo *Cuculus gularis*

Five recorded in late 1999, the latest at Tubab Kollon, near Tendaba, LRD, on 2 December. Three sightings involved juveniles and two (including the last) involved adults. Usually only a wet-season visitor¹.

Plain Nightjar *Caprimulgus inornatus*

On 23 November 1997, one was dazzled in the headlights of our vehicle on a dirt track a few km south-east of Kemoto, LRD. It was seen well and I noted the overall pale greyish coloration, lack of a white throat patch or obvious white tips to the wing-coverts, and fine dark flecking on the pale crown, which eliminate all other possible species. Apparently the third record in The Gambia¹, but all nightjars are likely to be under-recorded in the country.

Red-necked Nightjar *Caprimulgus ruficollis*

A road casualty on the dirt track to Kemoto, LRD, on 22 November 1997.

Shining-blue Kingfisher *Alcedo quadribrachys*

One on the Allahein River at Darsilami, near Marakissa, WD, on 23 November 1998. Rare in The Gambia¹.

(Northern) Carmine Bee-eater *Merops nubicus*

Regular at well-known locations at Basse, URD. Less expected were eight, with Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters *M. persicus*, in mangroves near Jurunku, NBD, on 2 December 1998.

Brown-throated Sand Martin *Riparia paludicola*

In 1997, singles at Brumen Bridge, LRD, on 21 November and nearby Kemoto, LRD, on 22 November. The former was seen particularly well as it hawked at close quarters, permitting appreciation of its overall rather pale coloration, especially the rump, which suggests that it may have been of the race *mauretanicus* rather than the Central African form *paludibula*.

Red-breasted Swallow *Hirundo semirufa*

1999 produced 20 at Pirang shrimp ponds, WD, on 23 November and ten over the Gambia River between Jangiangbureh and Baboon Island, CRD, on 30 November. A wet-season visitor¹.

Red-chested Swallow *Hirundo lucida*

Widespread. Separation of this species and Barn Swallow *H. rustica* often causes problems, though the tail pattern is diagnostic. This obvious feature is neither illustrated in Barlow *et al*¹ nor stressed in the text. In flight, *lucida* has an almost completely white undertail, with dark confined to the outer, rather short streamers, and narrowly on the edges of the remaining feathers.

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*

One at close quarters at Lamin Fields, WD, on 7 February 1999. There appear to be few Gambian reports, but Barlow *et al*¹ suggest that it is under-recorded.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*

Winter-plumaged male of the white-spotted form *L. s. cyanecula* at Jakhaly rice fields, on 26 November 1997. Barlow *et al*¹ consider the species rare to uncommon. Its typically shy behaviour and the presence of extensive suitable habitat in The Gambia suggest it may be under-recorded.

Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis*

Male coming into breeding plumage at Yundum on 7 February 1999. Barlow *et al*¹ consider the species rare to uncommon, being recorded less than annually.

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

Two records in 1999: one singing on the north bank of the river near Barajali, CRD, on 30 November and two singing in *Phragmites australis* near Pakali Ba, CRD, on 1 December. Considered rare in The Gambia¹.

Greater Swamp-Warbler *Acrocephalus rufescens*

At least three singing in mixed *Phragmites*/*Typha* stands near Pakali Ba, CRD, on 1 December. Though generally very skulking, one responded well to tape and showed reasonably well. A large, rather dull, grey-brown and short-winged warbler. Rather nondescript, but the unusual song is diagnostic. Little known in The Gambia¹.

Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*

One between Bambatenda and Farafenni, NBD, on 29 November 1998. Plumage features (rump and underparts colour) indicated that it was of the form *elegans*.

Chestnut-bellied Starling *Lamprotornis pulcher*

Eleven on roadside wires and feeding on the ground at Yundum, WD, on 18 November 1997. Scarce in The Gambia, apparently erratic and movements poorly understood¹.

Green-winged Pytilia *Pytilia melba*

Four, including two adult males, in a mixed feeding flock near Dipa Kunda, east of Farfenni, NBD, on 28 November. Rarely observed in The Gambia, with no previous records in NBD, though its presence was expected¹.

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